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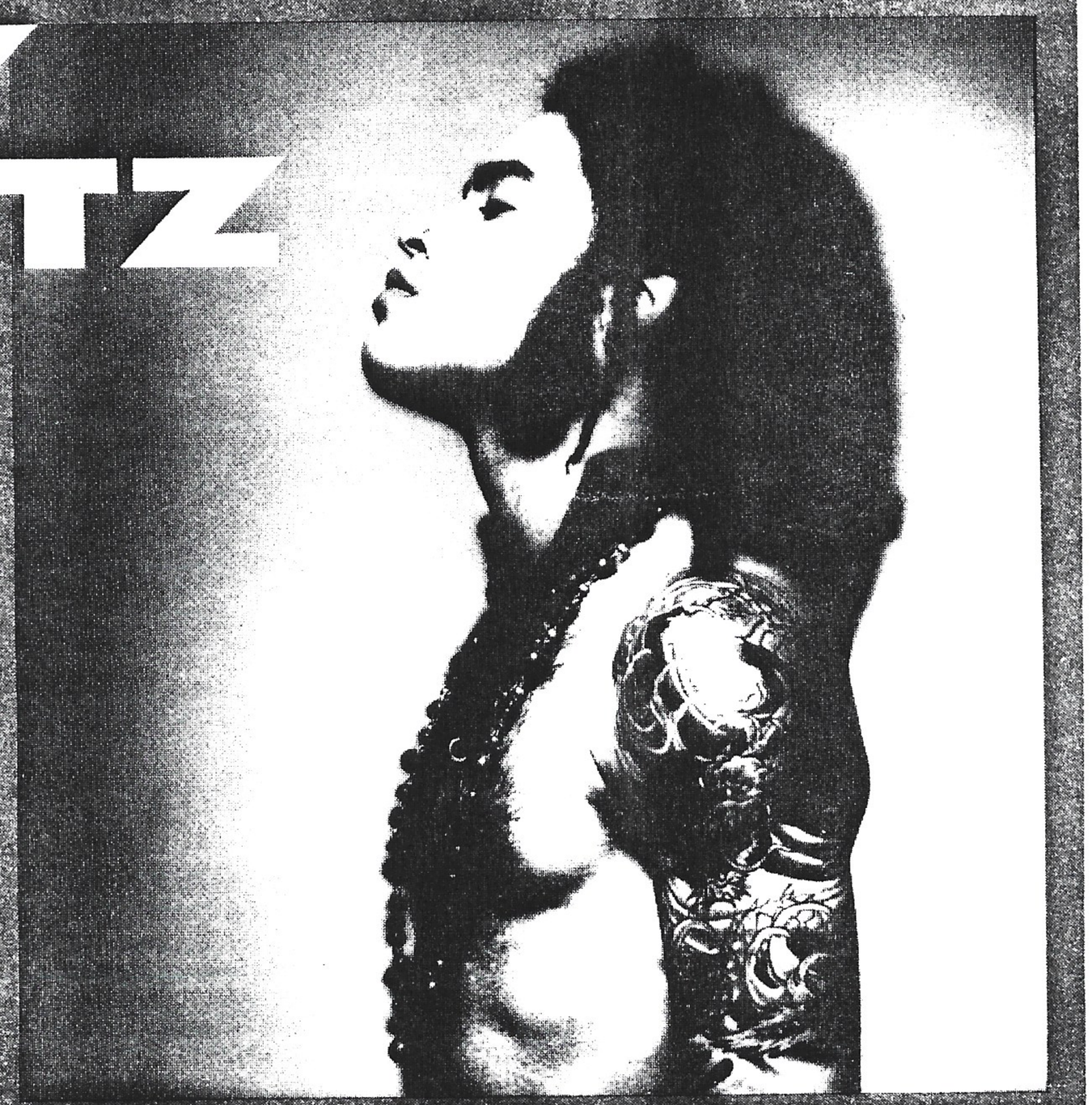
LENNY KRAVITZ



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LENNY KRAVITZ

It's All In The Way It Feels

by Danny McCue

For two albums now Lenny Kravitz has worn his nerve-endings on his bangle accesorized sleeve.

It all began with *Let Love Rule*, released in the fall of 1989, on which the then 25 year old wunderkind (singer/songwriter/multi-instrumentalist /arranger/producer) kissed the Reagan years goodbye with lyrics that espoused Woodstock-era peace and love, and music possessed of an undeniable groove. More significantly, his songs followed the tradition of self-revelation through rock that began, roughly, with John Lennon's "Norwegian Wood." The beliefs expressed and stories told were true. The central character of every number, Lenny Kravitz himself.

It's an approach that's continued, with more than a casual nod to the histrionic redemptions of James Brown and Sly Stone, on the dreadlocked and bell-bottom wearing artist's latest album, *Mama Said*.

Dedicated to actress Lisa Bonet, from whom he is currently getting divorced after a three-year marriage (the couple have one daughter, named Zoë), it is an album on which Kravitz speaks much of his devotion to his former spouse, often turning his comments directly toward her, while wrestling with the breakdown of their relationship. Also an exploration of soul as a multi-faceted genre, musical textures on the album range from decidedly gentle ("It Ain't Over 'Til It's Over," which peaked at #2 on Billboard's Hot 100 Singles Chart) to hard and persuasive funk ("Always On The Run," a song co-written and performed with Slash from Guns N' Roses). One song, the anguished "All I Ever Wanted," was co-written with John Lennon's younger son, Sean.

The only child of actress Roxie Roker, who played Helen Willis on *The Jeffersons*, and former NBC News producer Sy Kravitz, Lenny Kravitz spent his early childhood in New York City, his time divided between his parent's home on the Upper East Side and his grandmother's home in the rougher Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn.

After his family moved to California, he joined the California Boy's Choir and, after debuting at the Hollywood Bowl, would eventually perform with the Metropolitan Opera and conductors Zubin Mehta, Michael Tilson-Thomas and Sir David Wilcox. Becoming a rock and roll fan, however, changed the direction of his musical pursuits. Borrowing the money his parents had earmarked for his college education, and renaming himself Romeo Blue, he ensconced himself in a Los Angeles recording studio and began writing and recording his own music. Later, Lenny Kravitz once more, he took the best of that material (as well as some newer material) and made his debut on Virgin Records.

About to embark on a North American tour in support of *Mama Said* (which, incidentally, has already gone gold), I spoke to Kravitz from Los Angeles, where he was busily trying to resolve legal matters relating to his divorce. His tour will include a Halloween night performance at the Beacon Theater in New York City.

To begin with, you've produced, arranged and played most of the instruments on both Let Love Rule *and* Mama Said. *Do you produce your albums simply because you're fulfilling all those other roles, or is the idea of controlling your musical destiny the prime motivating factor?*

If I wasn't playing most of the stuff I could still produce it, you know what I mean? It's just [a matter of] my knowing how it should sound. That's really the bottom line, as far as production [goe's]. I know how it should sound and how it should be arranged. I like controlling my own destiny. I guess I have the talent to do it. Putting my music together is just kind of a natural thing for me to do. A painter paints his own painting... although [sheepishly] a lot of them used assistants.

Did you have any experience as a producer before you made Let Love Rule*?*

Well, I used to produce people's demos and stuff like that, for a little pocket change, but my experience is really just the music in my head and the records I grew up on. I [also] spent a lot of time around studios as a kid, watching, so I think I learned a lot just by hanging out. And then, having the classical training I had, with all of those great people, that afforded me the opportunity to learn as well.

"People always ask if I regret it being so personal... but that's the way I get it out."

PHOTO: ©1990 NANCIE HEMMINGER

I was pretty impressed when I read in your record company bio that you performed with the Metropolitan Opera and with Zubin Mehta and others during your childhood. You must have been a very poised little kid.

Well, you know, they had us trained pretty good... all [the influence] of which, of course, is gone now [laughs]. We were to be nice little gentlemen, that kind of thing. It was heavy discipline. Heavy discipline.

As an artist where does the line fall between creating something that's emotionally expressive and something that's meant to entertain an audience?

I don't ever think of it as entertainment. I always think of it as doing the music the way it should be. To me music is emotion, feelings, vibes, all that kind of stuff. And... I don't know, I guess it entertains others, but entertainment for me is making the stuff in the studio. That's what I love to do.

Every time I listen to Mama Said, *particularly the softer tracks, I'm reminded of Aaron Neville's "Tell It Like It Is." Was that a major record for you when you were growing up?*

Aaron Neville's "Tell It Like It Is"... not really. Why do you say that though?

It's just something about the feel...

Of which song?

Of your slower songs in general.

Wow. That's the first time I've heard that, But that's cool; everybody has a different view. That's what I like.

You explore a lot of different stylings of soul on this album... to what end? In what way is that an expression of your artistic vision?

My artistic vision is to do what I feel at the time [that I'm doing it]. People have a hard time with me because they can't define me. You listen to my album and on the same recording that you've got "Fields of Joy" you've got "It Ain't Over 'Til It's Over," and people feel something's [been] misplaced because they're used to formats and all that kind of shit. But that's not the way I do it. All the different songs have different characters and different feelings. So yeah, "It Ain't Over 'Til It's Over" should sound the way it sounds, with all of the R&B and the strings and the softness... and "Fields of Joy" sounds the way it sounds because that's the way it is. For me it's just doing what I feel, whatever style it may be.

Are you at the point now where, as a craftsman, you can say, 'well, I don't have this kind of song on my album and I'd like one' and then you write it?

No, it all comes from the songs, which are inspired. I don't plan anything. *I don't plan anything.* If you could see me in the studio you'd see that nothing is planned. It all just happens.

Are there themes that you don't write about, but wish you did?

No, they come up. Because the first album deals with my life as it was then and this one does the same now. Of course, you always listen to someone else's great song, Hendrix or somebody, and say, 'God I wish I could write a song like that,' but ultimately it's not my thing. It's his song and his thing at the time and I accept that and do my thing.

Your relationship with Slash seems like it could be a very mercurial one. Tell me about it.

We're really good friends actually. We're very good friends. He's one of my better friends... like some of them are worse, right? [laughs] He's one of my closer friends and he's a real sweet human being. He's one of the sweetest people I know. And we enjoy playing together. I think it's a relief for him, just in the fact that... you know... he's in his thing and when he can step out of it, it's nice. And working with somebody like him is nice for me because it's different. For both of us getting out of our respective situations and coming together is real nice. I like playing with him a lot.

How did the song you wrote with him for Mama Said, *"Always on the Run," come together? Who did what parts*

and that kind of thing?

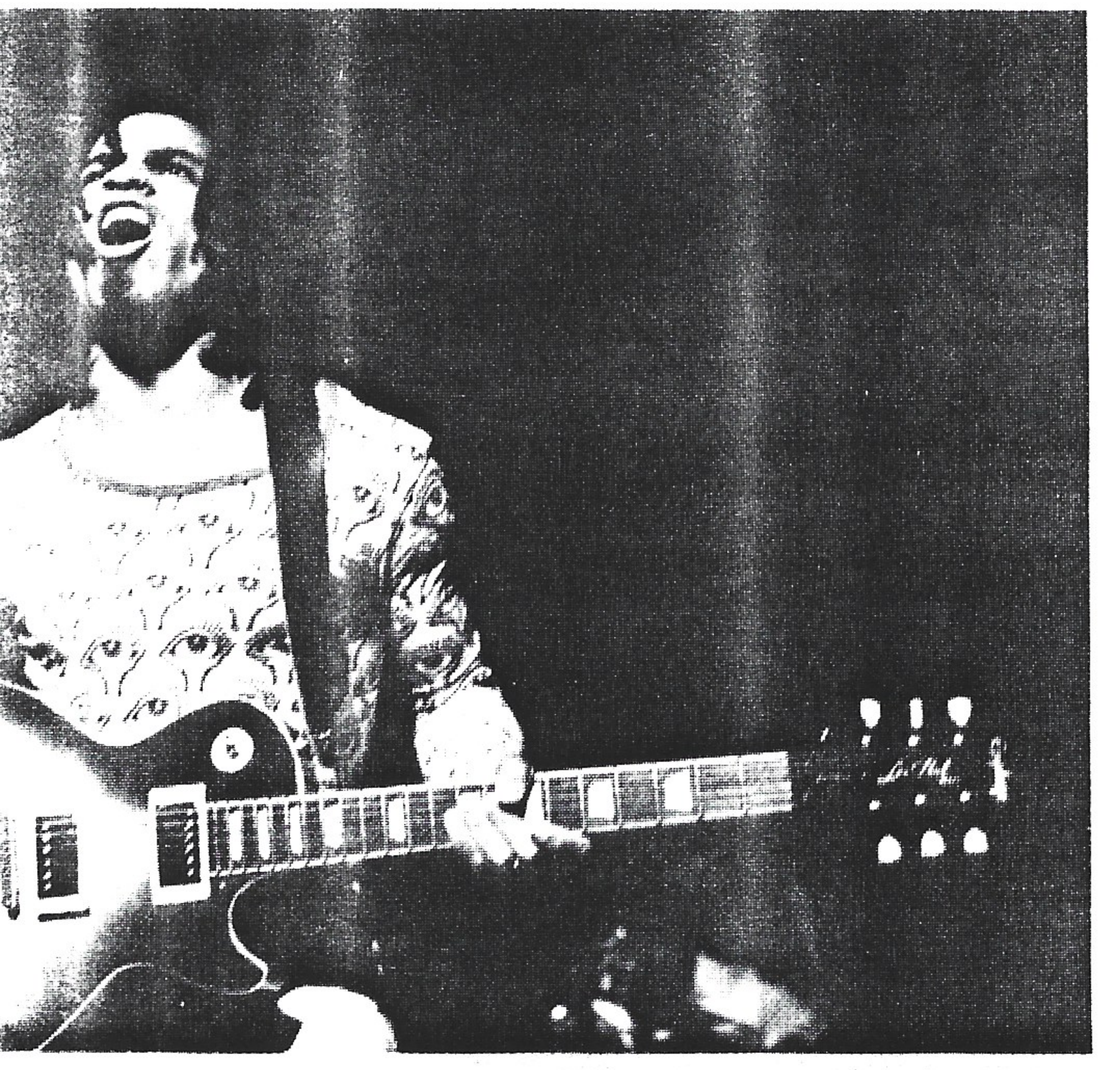
"Always on the Run"? I played bass and drums and guitar, and Slash played guitar. Then there's the horn players. When we cut it Slash was playing guitar and I was playing drums, that's how it started. We cut that, and then I did overdubs of the bass and my guitar part.

During this process were you feeding each other ideas?

Oh yeah, definitely. Definitely. That boy is bad. He's very talented and he's a great guitarist. Great. He's one of the best.

As I understand it you've known him since high school...

We knew each other from the hallway. It wasn't like we



knew each other.

And then there's the story about how he complimented you for Let Love Rule, *by saying he had had sex all night long while it was playing...*

A lot, he did. Mm-hm. I hear that from a lot of people. I mean, Billy Idol told me that... lots of musicians have told me they put my record on during... [humorously mystified] I don't know... they have good luck with the girls when it's playing [laughs].

When you conceive a song like "It Ain't Over 'Til It's Over," do you see it more or less as a whole, or do the elements fall into place over time?

Well, it started out on the Fender Rhodes keyboard, the melody, you know? But yeah, I heard it like that in my mind.

Strings and everything?

Yeah.

You've already said that a lot of what you do is drawn from inspiration; do you ever feel that you push yourself as an artist and writer?

I do. I'm a very hard worker. I'm in there all the time and if it's not right when I go home at night, I know I've left something behind that's not complete and I don't sleep. I mean, I push myself just to always grow, I guess.

Your music touches a responsive chord in a lot of people. Is there music that still touches that responsive chord in you?

Oh definitely, man. I put on the classics, people like Marley and Hendrix and Dylan, whatever, all the people that inspired me, all the R&B and soul music, and it still holds up.

How do you feel about your ability to touch people the way those musicians touched you?

Oh it's a trip. I don't know if I quite get it. You're used to being touched by others and people come up to you and say, 'Oh man, this song, and it makes me feel this way... me and my girlfriend got married to this... it brought us together... did this, did that... 'And it's like f*ck, you know? I don't know how to handle that really. I mean, it's not that I freak out or anything, it's just that I don't know if I quite get it. Because I'm in my place.

In preparation for the tour you're about to embark on you placed a musicians wanted ad in at least one national music publication that I know of; how successful was that?

Actually I didn't find anybody through that, but I saw hundreds of people and it showed me that there's not a lot of people left who can really play. Everyone is into their f*cking drum machines and their synthesizers. That makes it difficult to get guys to just play rock and roll and blues and soul. There aren't that many guys left with a lot of feel. It's weird.

So 'feel' is the primary criteria by which you judge musicians?

Yeah man, I'm looking for the feel, you know?

What's next on your list of priorities?

Obviously being able to play, but... a lot of guys can play and have chops and do runs all day-f*cking-long, but they don't have any soul. They rush. They don't lay back in the pocket. It's just a feel thing. They don't play the right notes. The tasty notes.

As you are a very autobiographical writer, is making rock and roll a cathartic experience for you?

Definitely. That's the way I express myself, through music, right? So I can't help but put it on the albums. People always ask if I regret it being so personal, like this album, you know? But that's the way I get it out. A lot of times, if I'm having a problem in life, I won't realize it and I'll write a song and I'll read the lyrics and not understand them. Then they'll slowly start to make sense and I'll say, 'shit, it revealed something.' There will be something in my subconscious that comes out in the lyrics. It's like, maybe I'll write something and then this problem will come down, months down the line, and I'll realize I've already written about it. It's weird. A lot of times I don't even realize my own problems and my own shit and my own emotions. It'll come out in a song and I won't really get it until later. Then the thing will be revealed and the song will make 100% sense. So I think either I've got some kind of ESP or I'm f*cked up and completely out of touch with myself and having my emotions come out in other ways.

Do you ever worry that you're going to burn yourself out by relying so heavily on your psyche for your material?

Well, every time you write a song you think you'll never be able to write another. You write a good song and it's like, 'f* ck, I wonder how many of these I've got left?' But you can't really worry about it. I believe that being able to make music is a gift from God and that it's all inspired, so I try to live right and be a decent human being, and hopefully it'll keep coming. I respect the gift very much.

How did you come to write "All I Ever Wanted" with Sean Ono Lennon?

I think of him as like, my little brother. We have a real nice relationship, and Yoko's a very sweet person in my life. We became friends when I took part in this John Lennon tribute in Liverpool a few years ago, after which we'd hang out together whenever we got a chance. He came home from Geneva, [Switzerland] last summer and spent a couple of nights at my house, just to get away for a few days and hang out, and he was banging on the piano and it just sort of happened.

In that kind of situation are you burning to get a song done, or do you do what you can and let the song finish itself over time?

Sometimes they happen very quickly, sometimes they take time. Some you finish the whole thing in one day; some things you just get the rhythm down for and they won't be finished for awhile.

Is there a reason you can point to for some songs taking longer than others?

Well, like, say "Dee," for instance, from the first album; that song was written and done in 15 minutes. I mean, boom, lyrics and everything. I was sitting in the studio one day, trying to work on some stuff and I wasn't getting anywhere. I was quite frustrated, really pissed off. It was during a down period [in my life]. I was sitting in the lounge in the studio, being completely miserable, and the song came right out. Boom. Ten minutes later I went into the studio and cut it. Got the sound. Sang it. Boom. It was over. Something like "I Built This Garden For Us," I came up with the music, the chord progression and the melody, and that wasn't finished for months. I mean months. I could not finish the f*cking lyrics — so it's like that, some things happen quickly and some things you might get a rhythm section, but not get a melody for awhile, or any of the other parts.

Many recording artists come from what could be called underprivileged or dreary backgrounds, but yours seems to have been very good: successful parents, exposure to art and music... What drives you? What accounts for your hunger to create?

Oh God... it's just the creative being inside of me. I mean, I've seen both sides. I've seen really rich and I've seen really poor, and they're both great or not great; they're just different. I had quite a contrast in my life, being brought up partly on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, partly in Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn, and growing up in a half Black, half white/Jewish family. I saw a lot of different things. I think the variety in my life makes me want to create.

When people talk about what's happening in the black music scene these days they often talk about rap. Do you feel any connection to that scene?

I enjoy a lot of rap. I think a lot of rap is really great; a lot of rap is garbage, but that's music, that's art, that's anything. We're all entitled to our opinion. I see a lot of guys getting over just talking. [exasperated] They're becoming big stars, just talking. And then there are great groups like Public Enemy...

Speaking of Public Enemy, when they toured this past summer with Sisters of Mercy and Gang of Four...

Weird tour, huh?

Yeah, but along the way they experienced a very glaring form of racism. Certain concert promoters refused to let Public Enemy play in their buildings. How do you feel being about to tour a country that's like this?

America's kind of scary, man. If you're not in New York or L.A., I mean, the rest of the shit in between is like, whoa... it's scary.

What's your live set going to be like this time around?

We play. We jam a lot of the tunes. We take them out. It's not like you're going to come just to hear the record. We like to have fun and stretch out and get into the music. But, you know, it's quite musical, it's not theatrical or anything like that.

Ok, now you say it's not theatrical, but there can be an awful lot of drama in just one guy singing onstage. Don't you feel that it's a dramatic moment when you're up there?

Oh definitely. When you're inside of a song... that's it. It's pure emotion, which I guess in turn becomes drama. Playing music is dramatic. I think a lot of people depend on the dramatics, [however], to get their music over. But then, and I know this is going to sound really corny, you get a guy like Tony Bennett, who can fucking stand up with a spotlight and a piano and sing his ass off and be dramatic. That's it. He's in the song. It's the same with somebody like Sarah Vaughan, or Bob Dylan, or Bob Marley, or anybody who can pick up a guitar or sit at a piano, and with their voice give you the whole thing. That's truly dramatic. ◇